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AUTHOR Guszak, Frank J.
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ABSTRACT

An elementary school in Texas has developed a program of reading instruction that immediately provides early readers with ample reading opportunities and materials rather than constraining them with "reading readiness" assessment. Initially, the absence of sufficient reinforcement material in the basal readers required increased amounts of reading practice material, so small readers using the adopted preprimer vocabulary were written, printed, and distributed to the children. Once the children mastered a specific reading exercise, they received new pages with additional words. Progressively more difficult materials were made for the children moving ahead, and additional materials were available for children needing extensive reinforcement. Comprehension checks were built into the program in the form of oral and written question tasks, and vocabulary tasks keyed to specific stories. This highly individualized program resulted in significant increases in reading achievement for first and second grade students. Factors critical to the success of the program included (1) political support by the school board and administrators, (2) coordination of all federally funded reading programs with the school's program, (3) reading many materials over extended periods of time, (4) abundant materials, and (5) "teacher trainers" to help each teacher implement the program. (HTH)

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Frank J. Guszak

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by Frank J. Guszak

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It seems like it was September 1979 when Tom Mandeville approached me and asked if I would address the Elementary Luncheon of the Southwest Regional Conference of the International Reading Association in San Antonio on January 30, 1981. My first response was to laugh because I couldn't imagine anyone planning anything so far in advance. Suspecting that much could happen in such a time interval, I said, "Sure, but please remind me of my commitment as I don't keep a calendar for that far in the future." Indeed, with the seizure of the embassy in Iran and the Russians in Afghanistan, I didn't know whether there would be a future so far away.

There was. Greetings to you all this 30th day of January, 1981.

When Tom sent me the conference theme of I Can Read, I felt a rather great compulsion to do something that would hopefully be worthy and would not be among the repertoire of the things I had done before.

The words I Can Read set off a myriad of thoughts as they must have in every one of you. I thought naturally of the countless children and adults who could read but who would not read if it were one of the choices offered them. It reminded me of Mike Rubin's description of a research study where some kids were asked which, if it got down to it, they would rather give up-- T.V. or daddy. You guessed it, as sad as it would be--dad would have to go.

I thought of the study reported by California Schools Superintendent Wilson Riles that found a strong statistical relationship between T.V. watching time and student test scores. Yes, the greater the amount of T.V. watching, the lower the scores on math and written language tests.

My thoughts turned to my own home situation where we have officially declared as off limits T.V. viewing on school nights. Incidentally, we've re-discovered some reading.

I thought about Jesse Jackson in Chicago urging black parents to set aside study time at home in order that students could take charge of their own destiny in making something of themselves.

All of the thoughts were turned in the direction of the ensuing statement I WILL READ. I WILL READ, I DO READ are affirmations of the reality of reading in the lives of people. To my amazement, I found studies of adult reading patterns that suggested ample skill but rather little reading by many adults beyond the job level types of demands.

Diehl and Mikulecky, Journal of Reading, December 1980, conclude that:

1. Reading on the job is a ubiquitous activity and may be the most prevalent type of reading done by employed adults. (Most of the reading was characterized as reading to do with no learning--that is, the person reads the directions to fix the machine, put the wagon together, etc., and later reports not remembering the information.)

2. Reading to learn where the person reads with the intention of remembering text information occurs 11% of the time.

After pouring over statistics relative to the amounts and kinds of reading done by children and adults, I attempted to write the definitive address. I failed. It seemed flat to me because it failed to articulate the all important so-what. Consequently, last night I swerved and decided to give the speech that will never be written up in your journals. I know because I've tried. I cannot determine whether the writing style is poor, the content redundant, or the message too vague. The nagging part is that this has been the single article I have wanted to write and share in the last two years. This podium presents me with the opportunity to share and test.

Before starting, I want to say that I will use the name of one school district. Other school districts have made fine gains, but to my knowledge, no one has made anything like the gains that this district has made. And terribly few districts can claim the type of success that has been accomplished.

This should not be considered as a put-down to anybody. Quite the contrary, it is a sharing of the problems that are confronting all of us-- as well as how some of those problems have been met and conquered. I have become more convinced in the last two years that reading instruction is often a political football that rises and falls on the whims of people who are often poorly equipped to make wise choices that will help children. I submit to you the latest decisions made in terms of the the textbook adoptions. It will always be that way as Frank Smith has pointed out, but there are some things that can stand the test of truth. I believe this true story is such.

A TRUE STORY: WESLACO

It's the fifth day of school in Alicia Cordova's first grade classroom in Weslaco, Texas (approximately six miles from Mexico). Not a single child is seen crying. Rather, all 27 boys and girls appear to be reading intently from some curious-looking homemade books as well as basal texts.

Subsequent inspection by the author reveals that the scene depicted in Alicia Cordova's classroom is witnessed throughout this unique first grade campus school in Weslaco. Namely, all of the children in all of the classes appear to be reading during the first week of school.

So what's so unique about first graders reading during the first week of school? So what's unique about a first grade campus school?

I'm rather unsure about the uniqueness of a first grade campus school, but I'm quite certain that most first graders are not reading during the first

weeks of school. Conventional wisdom and practice (Durkin, 1976; Wortham, 1976) reveal the presence of an activity generally labeled "reading readiness." What "reading readiness" actually means seems to be very unclear to those who are purportedly administering "reading readiness" programs. Presumably, it's "something you do to get kids ready to read."

How, then, do you know when kids are ready to learn to read? Once again, conventional wisdom dictates that they are usually ready if (1) they score satisfactorily on a standardized reading readiness test, e.g., Metropolitan Reading Readiness Test, and/or (2) they complete six weeks or some period of reading readiness which may be defined in terms of a workbook.

But wait a minute! Let's ask Ms. Cordova.

Me: Ms. Cordova, have you given these children their reading readiness test yet?

Ms. Cordova: No, we don't give reading readiness tests.

Me: If you don't give reading readiness tests, then how do you know when to start children into reading?

Ms. Cordova: We start them from the first day because we think they're ready.

If this seems confusing, one has to know where Ms. Cordova is coming from. She's found that reading readiness tests often predict failure for her children who will learn to read in the Rio Grande Valley. She has furthermore learned that reading readiness is not an acceptable substitute for teaching a child to read. Her position is summed up rather neatly by Joseph Pikulski in the following quote:

The solution to the problem of determining who is and who is not ready for reading seems quite simple and straightforward: within the first few weeks of kindergarten, and continuously

thereafter, children should be exposed to regular and frequent opportunities to read. Those children who come to school already knowing how to read should be encouraged to do so. Letters, words, and sentences from reading materials should be used to teach reading to those children who seem capable of profiting from reading instruction. These same materials should be used to develop additional readiness skills for those who need them. The question of ready or not really becomes irrelevant when children are repeatedly offered the opportunity to read. It is quite simple to tell when they are ready to begin reading because they will begin reading.

Indeed, all 27 children in Ms. Cordova's class had shown they were ready and were reading. So, too, had the other first graders in the other 26 classrooms in Weslaco's first grade school.

Little children (6 and 7 year olds in Miami) were asked, "Can you read without a book?" (Link, Tompkins, and Shaw, "Can you read without a book?" Language Arts, Vol. 57, No. 8 (Nov/Dec 1980), pp. 857-865.)

shirts
traffic signs
street signs
buttons
wrapping paper (Baby Ruth, Reggie, Happy Birthday)
blocks
names in a puzzle like California
names of games
ice cream flavors
trucks
words on buildings
names of foods
baseball cards
menus
crayons, record covers
bumper stickers
money, pencils, calendars

The Program

Providing children with extensive daily reading situations was the main thrust of Dr. Richard Wubben, Reading Director for the Weslaco I.S.D. Wubben knew that children provided with reading opportunities in proper materials with

appropriate teacher support would prosper.

Because of the critical nature of beginning reading to subsequent reading success, Wubben in concert with Lee Bannister, the Teacher Trainer for the 1st Grade Campus, established reading on the 1st grade campus as top priority.

Initially, Wubben, Bannister, and the teachers sought to provide increased amounts of reading practice material that were deemed necessary by the absence of sufficient reinforcement material in the basals. This meant that small readers using the adopted preprimer vocabulary were written, printed, and distributed to children via their teachers. These readers, often referred to as buildup readers, became the primary instructional material in the program.

In-service was initiated with Wubben and Bannister working daily in the classrooms with teachers in implementing the reading directives. Practice, practice, practice became the key words as pupils would read, reread, and develop mastery of their connected reading materials. With mastery came more advanced reading challenges. Specifically, this meant that a child would receive a new page (or pages) with additional words when he had mastered the previous pages.

Because pupils moved at different speeds, materials had to be made available to keep the speedier children moving ahead. Conversely, additional practice materials were needed for children in need of extensive reinforcements. Needless to say, the program was highly individualized.

With a population of approximately 94% Mexican-American children, great attention was given to understanding. It was not sufficient that children could murmur the words without being able to verbalize about what they were reading. Consequently, comprehension checks were built into the

program in the form of oral and written question tasks, closure tasks to be taken home, vocabulary tasks keyed to specific stories, etc.

Results

Standardized as well as informal assessment techniques administered in April verified what close observers had noted--children had achieved in a highly significant fashion.

Informal assessments of beginning and ending reading levels revealed that what had been essentially a "beginning reading" population had been transformed into a population of readers reading at and above the national average.

Achievement testing in April, 1978, verified the informal assessment levels by revealing that 66% of Weslaco's 1st graders were at or above the 50th percentile as opposed to only 10% in previous years. Further indications of success were seen at the bottom of the distribution where only 9% of the 1st graders fell. Prior to 1977-78, over 90% of Weslaco's 1st graders were falling below the 40th percentile (in contrast with the 9% there now).

Further testimony relative to the merits of reading practice were coming in other grades as well where similar measures were established. Using the same practice concepts, 2nd and 3rd graders showed outstanding gains as well.

Second graders showed sharp gains. 93% of these students scored at or above the 40th percentile whereas only 8 to 12% were traditionally meeting or exceeding this level. This meant that only 7% of Weslaco's 2nd graders were below the 40th percentile, a most remarkable finding.

Similar results were recorded in the 3rd grade where 90% of the students achieved at or above the 40th percentile. Again, the increases were dramatic as only 8 to 12% of the previous second graders were achieving at this point.

Conclusions

Weslaco has found an answer to the vexing problem of why some children are not learning to read well in America. The answer is all the more important because it concerns kids who are the targets of various types of federal intervention programs--namely linguistically different (Horn, 1970), often lower socio-economic children.

At first blush the answer may be oversimplified in terms of something like this:

Wubben and Bannister
individualized reading
reading practice
homemade reading materials

Unfortunately, answers are not so simple. The answer includes all of the above but some other things as well. A very brief effort to summarize some of these critical factors follow. These include discussions of familiar response patterns, and the Weslaco response which may be useful to others who would seek to follow it.

1. Political support by the board, superintendent, and key administrative staff is crucial.

A familiar pattern: Weak programs persist while effective ones are dismissed. Good, strong programs go down the drain because of ignorance and insensitivity to program happenings and results.

Weslaco's pattern: Weslaco has a committed board, a supportive superintendent in Mr. A. N. Rico, as well as a strong supporting cast of key administrators.

2. Resources must be combined so that all the programs are working harmoniously for the benefit of children.

A familiar pattern: Federal programs have proven to be both a boon and a blight upon reading development. While certain programs have brought outstanding results, many, no most, are poorly coordinated. Schiffman (1978), the current Director of the Right-to-Read Project, has observed such consequences and has called for the coordination of federal programs around a sound, accountable base.

Weslaco's pattern: Weslaco has orchestrated all segments of the program toward common goals. Consequently, the various title programs and special education programs are linked programmatically. For example, a pupil may get extensive comprehension assistance in a Title I reading class over materials being read in the homeroom.

3. Children must read a great deal.

A familiar pattern: Allington (1977) asks the question, "How are they ever going to get good if they never read?" Through informal observation of connected reading in certain reading classes he found very little reading going on during reading period. Paulissen (1978) in a study of first grade classrooms found almost a total paucity of connected reading in the reading period, with most children spending less than 1% of the reading period in connected reading.

Weslaco's pattern: In every class I visited in Weslaco (from Grade 1 to 8) I observed students in the reading act for extended periods of time. Weslaco's first graders read independently over 45 minutes a day at the outset and lengthen their amount of connected reading as the year progresses.

4. Books and book type material must be provided in great abundance when children are required to read a great deal.

A familiar pattern: Machines, filmstrips, and various other gadgets occupy much classroom space. Noticeably absent are books other than the adopted basal reader and workbook for the grade. Typically, a reader or two is supposed to furnish the bulk of reading for an entire class for an entire year.

Weslaco's pattern: Different levels and different titles of books are found in the various classrooms. The emphasis upon providing more books for avid readers is the logical extension of a program that puts a premium upon reading daily.

5. Teachers must be supported in the classroom in their efforts to bring about increased reading and reflection about reading.

A familiar pattern: Districts provide a few days of in-service during the year where an entertaining speaker is brought in to talk with teachers. Seldom are continuing workshops provided with regular feedback to teachers about what they (the teachers) are doing in their classrooms. Consequently, teachers feel that they are left very much on their own until they get in trouble. If they don't get into obvious trouble, administration generally seems unconcerned.

Weslaco's plan: Weslaco has commissioned "Teacher trainers" to work in classrooms every day with teachers. The teacher trainers move from classroom to classroom assisting teachers in implementing the program. Before they are selected to be teacher trainers, these individuals have proven themselves in classrooms with the system. Their work is overseen by the Reading Director, Dr. Wubbena.

The success of any reading program can only be partially measured by achievement testing. It must ultimately stand the test of voluntary reading. Since its onset Wubben's program and other similar programs have proved their worth in terms of the increased appetites of readers who are baring the shelves of their libraries in their zest to read. Children are building upon an internal set to know and explore.

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